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ABSTRACT

In enacting legislation that impacts on rural areas or is directly related to telecommunications, Congress has rarely considered the role of communications in rural development. Neither the House nor the Senate Agriculture Committees considered the role of telecommunications in drafting the 1972 Rural Development Act. While no specific provisions for telecommunications were included in the Act, the Farmers Home Administration approved a loan for a broadband communications system under Title I, Section 102 regarding Community Facility Loans. Although the needs addressed in the 1976 Educational Broadcasting Facilities and Telecommunications Act were not specifically rural, experiments in using satellite communications for educational purposes were conducted. The 1975 Regional Development Act provided for demonstration projects in health, nutrition, and vocational and technical education. Yet, there was no explicit intention for telecommunications to be included in these projects. This lack of attention appears to be a matter of oversight rather than one of deliberate exclusion. While there have been numerous broadband communications experimental projects involving different rural areas, most have started with technology rather than program. Without a clear Congressional mandate, it is highly unlikely that a coordinated systematic approach will evolve using broadband communications technology to serve rural people. (Author/NQ)

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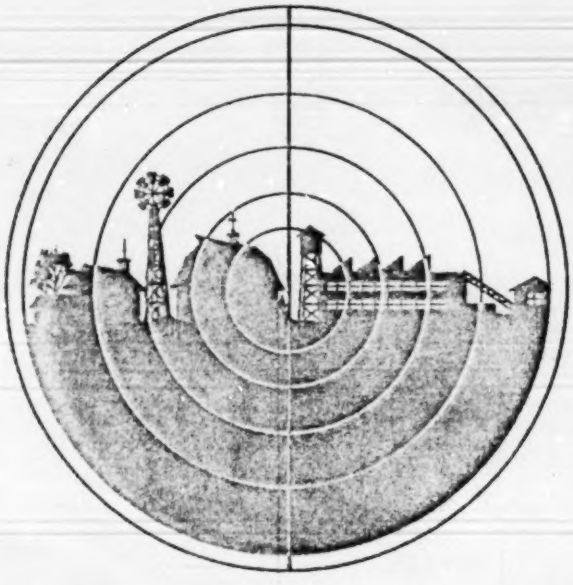

November 15, 16, and 17, 1976

Washington, D. C.

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Communications and Rural America

Purpose

In April 1976, the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) of the U.S. Congress issued a staff report entitled *The Feasibility and Value of Broadband Communications in Rural Areas.* The purpose of the conference is to extend this effort by:

- Considering a broader range of communications technologies which might be used to meet rural needs.
- Further examining the question of whether system demonstrations aimed at achieving economic viability are needed and if so, identifying the kinds of demonstrations which might be undertaken.
- Further examining whether rural interests have been adequately considered in existing Federal communications policy.

The outcome of this effort will be a report incorporating the information and points of view presented at the conference.

Congressional Interest

The conference is being held in response to a request for additional information on rural communications from Senator Herman Talmadge, Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, as approved by the 12 member Technology Assessment Board of the U.S. Congress. Senator Pastore of the Senate Subcommittee on Communications subsequently joined Senator Talmadge in support of the conference. It is intended that the conference will be of value to the U.S. Congress in its deliberations on communications policy.

Conference Dates and Organization

The conference will convene for 3 days, November 15–17, 1976, with about 60 invited participants. For the first 2 days, participants will be equally divided among three panels which will meet in parallel. Each panel will concentrate upon a specific topic addressed in the OTA report as follows:

- **Panel 1.** Rural Development and Communications.
- **Panel 2.** Technology, Economics, and Services.
- **Panel 3.** Federal Policy.

On the third day, participants from all three panels will meet together to exchange and synthesize findings and explicitly address the question of rural system demonstrations.

Cosponsoring Institutions

The National Rural Center is cosponsoring Panel 1 (Rural Development and Communications). The Aspen Institute is cosponsoring Panel 3 (Federal Policy).

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INTENDED ROLE OF COMMUNICATIONS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT -- LEGISLATIVE ANALYSIS

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DISCUSSION PAPER FOR PANEL 1

OTA CONFERENCE ON COMMUNICATIONS AND RURAL AMERICA

November 1976

Prepared by

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In enacting legislation that impacts on rural areas or that is directly related to telecommunications, Congress has rarely taken into consideration the role of communications in rural development.

Neither the House nor the Senate Agriculture Committees considered the role of telecommunications in drafting the Rural Development Act of 1972, though it was not deliberately excluded. Dr. Peter Goldmark, former president and research director of CBS Laboratories and founder of the New Rural Society Project, first raised the issue with the Senate Agriculture Committee in mid-1972 after the bill had been signed into law.

While no specific provisions dealing with telecommunications were included in this Act, under Title I, Section 102 regarding Community Facility Loans, the Farmers Home Administration has approved a loan for the Western Wisconsin Communications Cooperative in Trempeleau County, Wisconsin for a broadband communications system. Some forty different kinds of programs have been financed under this section. The Trempeleau project is the only communications program funded and represents only a small portion of the financing program. The type of facility receiving the greatest number of loans has been fire departments, while hospitals, nursing homes, and other medical care facilities requiring sizable amounts of capital have received the largest share of financing.

The needs addressed in the Educational Broadcasting Facilities and Telecommunications Act of 1976 are not specifically rural. Nevertheless, the Rocky Mountain and Appalachian experiences in employing satellite communications for educational purposes offered positive examples of how telecommunications demonstrations could be used in rural areas.

The Educational Broadcasting Facilities and Telecommunications Act of 1976 declares as its purpose: "(1) to assist (through matching grants) in the construction of noncommercial educational television or radio broadcasting facilities, and (2) to demonstrate (through grants or contracts) the use of telecommunications technology for the distribution and dissemination of health, education, and other public or social service information." Telecommunications demonstrations will be conducted by public or private nonprofit organizations which seek to demonstrate innovative methods or techniques in utilizing nonbroadcast telecommunications.

The Regional Development Act of 1975 also provides for demonstration projects in health and nutrition and in vocational and technical education, but there was no explicit intention on the part of the House Committee on Public Works and Transportation or the Senate Committee on Public Works for telecommunications to be included in these demonstration projects. There was a general awareness of the importance of communications and of the experience of the Appalachian Regional Commission in utilizing satellite communications. In discussing demonstration health programs the Senate Committee's report encouraged the Appalachian Regional Commission "to develop new approaches to the organization and provision of health, nutrition and child care services with special emphasis on areas without sufficient services; to demonstrate new methods to reduce costs of health and child care through efficient use of all health personnel, new systems of communication and transportation..." (S. Report 94-278, p.16). Thus, the Act allows some leeway for the use of telecommunications in demonstration projects, but no specific mandate from Congress was issued.

In summary, it is accurate to say that Congress has given scant attention to the role broadband communications might play in encouraging rural development. This lack of attention appears to be a matter of oversight rather than one of deliberate exclusion.

While there have been a number of broadband communications experimental projects involving different rural areas, most of these efforts have started with technology rather than program. Similarly, a General Accounting Office report finds that 18 federal agencies, for the most part without any coordination, funds cable television research and development projects for rural and urban areas. Without a clear Congressional mandate, it is highly unlikely that a coordinated, systematic approach will evolve in using broadband communications technology to serve rural people.

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